

INVESTIGATING THE FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' LOWER PREFERENCE IN SELECTING ENGLISH LITERATURE IN GRADE 10 IN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

English literature is introduced as an optional subject in grade 10 according to school curriculum in Sri Lanka. However, a few numbers of students only prefer English literature in grade 10. This study aimed at investigating the factors influencing students' lower preference in selecting English literature in grade 10 in three selected schools in Kinniya Education Zone, Trincomalee, Sri Lanka. This study was a descriptive survey research and mixed approach was applied in data collection and data analysis. In this study, 120 grade 10 students from the selected schools, 5 English teachers, an ADE – English and an ISA – English in Kinniya Education Zone were selected as sample size. The primary data were collected using a questionnaire and a structured interview. In this study, both qualitative and quantitative methods were chosen in data collection. The results-based conclusions show that only a few numbers of students prefer to select English literature in grade 10 in the selected schools in every academic year. Although less than 5 students selected English literature every year, the results production in the GCE (O/L) examination was lower. According to participants' opinion survey, there were several factors influencing students' lower preference in selecting the English literature which include: students' lack of sufficient English language proficiency, lack of interest and motivation, fear of losing results in the GCE (O/L) examination, negative attitude that English literature is a difficult subject and lack of competent English teachers.

KEYWORDS: English literature, General Certificate of Education, Grade 10, Ordinary Level, preference

1. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka consists of quality education system among the South Asian countries which offers free education up to higher education. According to the Sri Lankan education system, primary, secondary and collegiate education is provided in school system. The higher education on the other hand is provided at universities, colleges of education and other state and non-state institutions. As far as the primary and secondary education are concerned, two major general government examinations: Scholarship and General Certificate of Education (G.C.E) Ordinary Level (O/L) are conducted by the Examination Department, Sri Lanka. According to the G.C.E (O/L) curriculum, there are nine subjects; six main subjects and three optional subjects. Moreover, grade 10 is considered as G.C.E (O/L) first year, and students are strictly instructed to select three optional subjects apart from the main subjects in grade 10.

The subjects such as Art, Dancing, Music, Drama and Theatre, Appreciation of Tamil Literary Text, Appreciation of Sinhala Literary Text, Appreciation of Arabic Literary Text and Appreciation of English Literary Text are included as second optional subject category. Appreciation of English Literary Text is also known as English literature (English Lit.). However, Appreciation of English Literary Text is selected by a few numbers of students at government schools in Sri Lanka every year. Although English language is taught as a second language from grade 3 to 13 in government schools in Sri Lanka, students get afraid of selecting English Lit.

English is a compulsory subject from grade 3 to advanced level in Sri Lankan schools. English is taught as a subject for five periods at all levels (primary, junior secondary and senior secondary) in schools. Moreover, at primary level, each period lasts for 30 minutes duration, while in the upper levels the duration is 40 minutes (Navaz & Begum, 2017).

Kinniya Education Zone is one of the 98 education zones in Sri Lanka, and there are three education divisions and 66 schools including three national schools in the Kinniya Education Zone. Out of the total schools, there are 29 G.C.E (O/L) schools, and currently 139 teachers of English exist. However, only five students had selected English Lit. in the academic year 2021 from the Kinniya Education Zone. In particular, although a few students select English Lit every year, they produce lower results in the GCE (O/L) examination. According to the GCE (O/L) results analysis of the Kinniya Education Zone, no students have obtained 'A' pass in English Lit in the Kinniya Education Zone so far. There are several factors which contribute to the students' lower preference and lack of interest in selecting English Lit., and the lower results production in the GCE (O/L) examination.

Moreover, when other education zones in Trincomalee District are concerned, 51 students in grade 10 had selected English Lit. in the academic year 2021 from the Trincomalee Education Zone. On the other hand, there were no students selected English Lit in the academic year 2021 from both Mutur Education Zone and Kantale education Zone. The primary reason for students' lower preference maybe lack of sufficient English language proficiency. The GCE (O/L) results percentage of English of the Kinniya Education Zone was 33%. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the factors behind students' lower preference and lack of interest in selecting English Lit, this study was based on three national schools in the Kinniya Education Zone.

As far as the Kinniya Education Zone is concerned, the total number of grade 10 students is 2052 in the academic year, 2021. In particular, there are four schools including three national schools which offer bilingual education, and the total number of bilingual students in grade 10 in the current academic year is 39. In this study, three national schools in the Kinniya Education Zone were selected for investigation. The total number of grade 10 students in the three selected schools is 419. However, only 5 students have selected English Lit in 2021. Moreover, there were a few numbers of students who selected English Lit in the previous academic years. Most of the students fail to realize the value of studying English Lit. Several factors that contribute to the students' lack of interest and lower preference in selecting English Lit. This study investigated the factors influencing students' preference in selecting English Lit.

Hence, this study is based on the following questions: Why do a large number of students in three selected schools of Kinniya Education Zone express lower preference in selecting English Lit in grade 10?; Does students' lack of English language proficiency affect their preference in selecting English Lit?; Do students who prefer English Lit produce satisfactory results in English Lit in GCE (O/L) examination?. The objectives of this study is to investigate the factors influencing grade 10 students' preference for selecting English Lit in three selected schools of The Kinniya Education Zone schools; to analyze the students GCE (O/L) results performance in English Lit of the selected schools; to suggest suitable remedies and recommendations to increase the percentage for selecting English Lit in the Kinniya Education Zone

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning English literature gives a number opportunities for ESL and EFL learners to master in English language, and it helps to improve learners' language skills and other skills such as critical thinking, interpretation and creative thinking. As reviewing a previous study, Chan (1999) claims that Literature has to be taught since it uses a powerful language, and consists of various skills for language learning (p. 15). Similarly, Literature has been the part of a language which can improves different skills apart from language skills (Vethamani and Rahman, 2010). However, as far as the Sri Lankan school education system is concerned, English literature is introduced only after 10 years of formal learning. As students do not have any background knowledge about English Literature, they fear to

choose this subject. In particular, their English language proficiency seems low due to lack of opportunities to develop their language skills.

Further, in another similar study, Calia (2009) states that reading can be one of the easiest ways to learn a language. Therefore, when Literature is taught, it will help the learners to enrich vocabulary and writing skill (p. 33). According to school curriculum in Sri Lanka, English language is taught as a second language from grade 3 to 13 but English Lit is not introduced in the textbook. Students can select English Lit as an optional subject in grade 10. However, due to lack of English language proficiency, they show lower preference in selecting the subject. They prefer to select Tamil/Sinhala literature. Premawardhena (2007) points out that the secondary school curriculum in Sri Lanka includes introduction to Lit of the mother tongue (Sinhala/Tamil) and English. As a result, students are expected to have prior exposure to literary works, literary criticism and appreciation at universities. When students opt their academic programme in English, they find difficulties in learning English Lit.

In particular, the findings of a local study reveal that a limited numbers of students who are somewhat fluent in the English language only take an English Lit examination at the GCE O/L.

Moreover, English Lit examination is offered in the GCE (A/L) studies too. (Navaz and Begum, 2017). Teachers are suggested to apply modern teaching approaches in language classes. When modern teaching approaches are used, students can be motivated to study English Lit. Premawardhena (2007) states that the communicative approach adopted by current methodology promotes learner-centered teaching, demanding the students to be independent, critical, logical and analytical in their thinking and devote time to self-learning under minimum supervision.

3. METHODOLOGY

This part presents the methods and materials used in this study. They are presented in several sub-sections which include: research design, population and sample, research instruments and data collection methods.

3.1 Research Design

This study was a descriptive survey research and both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Mixed approach) were used in data collection and data analysis since the research instruments were both qualitative and quantitative. The sampling method of this study was systematic sampling. The data analysis methods were descriptive and statistical.

3.2 Sample Selection

The total population of this study was 419 grade 10 students of the three selected schools, and 139 ESL teachers in the Kinniya Education Zone. Out of the total population, 120 students were selected as sample size in students' perspective. 40 students from each school were systematically selected, and the sample includes the 39 bilingual students. Moreover, out of 139 ESL teachers, 5 teachers who teach English Lit were selected as sample of the study in teachers' perspective. Further, an Assistant Director of Education (ADE) – English and an In-service-Advisor (ISA) – English was also selected as sample population for primary data collection.

3.3 Research Instruments

In this study, two instruments: a questionnaire and a structured interview were employed as data collection tools of this study. The questionnaire was administered to collect opinions among the selected students concerning their preference in selecting optional subjects in grade 10, and the factors behind their lower preference and lack of interest in selecting English Lit. The questionnaire consisted of both close-ended and open-ended questions. The interview on the other hand was employed to collect opinion survey among the selected teachers, ADE and ISA concerning the factors influencing students' lower preference in selecting English Lit and lower results production at GCE (O/L) examination.

3.4 Data Collection

The secondary data were collected from the official records of the three selected schools, the Kinniya Education Zone and Provincial Department of Education, Eastern Province as well as the GCE (O/L) results analysis of the Kinniya Education Zone. The primary data on the other hand were collected from the students, teachers, ADE and ISA using the questionnaire and the structured interview. The qualitative data were collected using the interview and the quantitative data were collected using the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed among the students after giving clear instruction on how to answer the questions. These data were collected by visiting their schools. The data from the teachers, ADE and ISA were collected through telephone conversation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the primary and secondary data, and the discussion of the findings of this study.

4.1 2018 & 2019 GCE (O/L) Results Performance in English Literature in the Selected Schools

According to the GCE (O/L) results analysis of 2018 and 2019 of the Kinniya Education Zone, a few number students had opted English Lit and their results performance was very lower. As far as the Kinniya Central College is concerned, no students had sat for the exam in the academic years 2018 and 2019. Similarly, no students had sat for the exam at Al-Aqza National School in 2018 and 2019. It is noteworthy to mention that no students have selected English Lit consecutively for four years. However, bilingual education is offered at both schools. On the other hand, as concerning Kinniya Girls' College, four students had sat for the exam in 2018, and their result performance was 2 Credit (C) pass and 2 Single (S). Three students had sat for the exam in 2019, and their results performance was 1C and 2S. The following table shows the 2018 & 2019 GCE (O/L) results performance in English Lit in the selected schools.

Table. 1: 2018 & 2019 GCE (O/L) results performance in English Lit

Name of the school	Number of students who sat for GCE (O/L) exam in 2018	Results performance	Number of students who sat for GCE (O/L) exam in 2019	Results performance
Kinniya Central College	-	-	-	-
Kinniya Girls' College	4	2C and 2S	3	1C and 2S
Al-Aqza National School	-	-	-	-

As above findings are discussed, when the three selected schools are compared, both the Kinniya Central College and the Al-Aqza National School are boys' school whereas the Kinniya Girls' College is a girls' school. In the past two years, students at the Kinniya Girls' College had only selected English Lit. Therefore, it is obvious that girls are interested in learning English Lit than boys. Moreover, according to GCE (O/L) results record of the Kinniya Education Zone, no students have obtained Advanced (A) pass so far. As a result, students get afraid of opting English Lit in grade 10. They negatively think that English Lit is a difficult subject and it will affect their results. Therefore, a smaller number of students select English Lit and they produce lower results.

4.2 Students who opted English Literature in the academic Years: 2019, 2020 & 2021

This part focuses on students' option in selecting English Lit in the three academic years 2019, 2020 and 2021. The following table presents the details regarding students' option in selected English Lit in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

Table. 2: Students' option in selected English Lit in 2019, 2020 and 2021

Name of the school	2019	2020	2021
Kinniya Central College	-	-	01

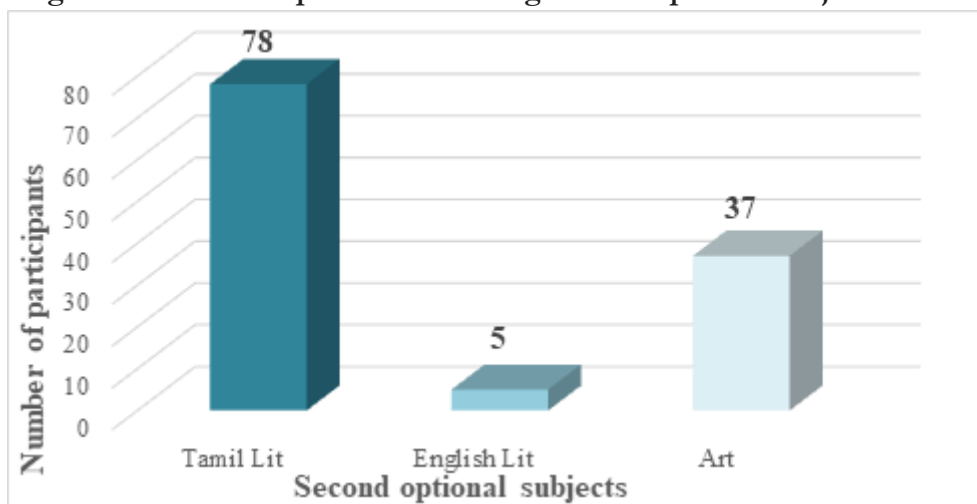
Kinniya Girls' College	4	3	4
Al-Aqza National School	-	-	-

According to the data presentation, the findings show that a very few numbers of students opt English Lit every year in the selected schools. A few numbers of students prefer to select the subject only from the Kinniya Girls College every year. As far as the Kinniya Central College is concerned, in 2019 and 2020, there were no students who selected English Lit. However, only 1 student who selected the subject in 2021. It is noteworthy that the total number of grade 10 students in the Kinniya Central College were 140. When the Kinniya Girls' College is concerned, every year less than 5 students select English Lit. However, when the total number of grade 10 students in the Kinniya Girls' College is focused, a very a smaller number of students select the subject. Furthermore, no any students had opted English Lit for past three years as well as in 2021 at the Al-Aqza National School despite of consisting of a larger students' population. According to the findings, it is clear to state that the primary factor for students' lack of preference was lack of sufficient English language proficiency among most of the students. The 2019 English results performance in the GCE (O/L) of the Kinniya Education Zone was 33%. This percentage obviously shows that most of the students in the Kinniya Education Zone possess lower English language proficiency.

4.3 Grade 10 Students' Option for Selecting Second Optional Subjects in 2021

There are three optional subject categories in the curriculum. In this study, second optional subject category and grade 10 students' preference and interest in selecting English Lit were focused. The following graph shows students' option for selecting second optional subjects in 2021.

Figure 1: Students' option for selecting second optional subjects in 2021



As discussing the above data presentation, there are many optional subjects in the second optional subject list. However, mostly major three subjects such as Tamil Lit, English Lit and Art are only selected at schools in the Kinniya Education Zone. Accordingly, the data regarding students' option for selecting the second optional subjects were collected among the participants. Out of the total sample population (120), 78 students had selected Tamil Lit in 2021 whereas only 5 students had selected English Lit. Moreover, 37 students had selected Art. In particular, the sample population includes 29 bilingual students.

The primary factor for students' lower preference was students' negative attitude that English Lit is a difficult subject and other subjects, Tamil Lit and Art are easy subjects. According to the GCE (O/L) results analysis of the Kinniya Education Zone, Tamil Lit percentage was 80% and Art percentage was 89 in 2019. Since students can easily obtain better result in the other optional subjects rather than English Lit, they do not think about choosing

English Lit. Similarly, a similar study was carried out in Ampara District investigating the status of English Lit, the findings of the study show that students get afraid that they may lose an 'A' grade at the GCE O/L examination if they choose English Lit. Poor language proficiency also seems to influence their preference in offering Lit (Navaz and Begum, 2017). Therefore, the findings of the current study also reveal that a large number of students showed their lack of interest and lower preference in selecting English Lit in grade 10.

4.4 Factors Influencing Students' Lower Preference in Selecting English Literature as Optional Subject

Based on the aim of the current study, opinions regarding the factors which contribute to the students' lower preference in selecting English Lit in grade 10 were gathered in three perspectives. The opinions were collected among the students, teachers, ADE and ISA through the questionnaire and the interview.

4.4.1 Opinions in Students' Perspective

As far as the factors in students' perspective are concerned, students' lack of sufficient English language proficiency, lack of motivation, lack of interest, fear of losing marks and negative attitude that English Lit is a difficult subject were the major factors collected among the students. 70% of the participants stated that due to lack of English language proficiency, most of the students show lower preference and lack of interest. When a large number of students are poor in English, they will be afraid of selecting English Lit. Further, 54% of the participants had stated that they were not motivated to select English Lit and they were unaware of the value of studying English Lit. Most of the ESL teachers in the selected schools and other schools in the Kinniya Education Zone do not encourage the students to select the subject since they are not competent enough to teach Literature.

Moreover, 38% of the participants get afraid of losing their best result performance in the GCE (O/L) exam by selecting English Lit and they think that it is a difficult subject. Producing best results in English Lit seems to be hard. However, as far as other districts in the Eastern Province are concerned, most of the students prefer to choose English Lit. According to the findings of a similar study which was carried out based on Ampara District, out of the 35 English medium students, only 15 of them did not follow English Lit. Despite of it, some students had said that the most primary reason for the students' negative attitude was that they felt English Lit was a difficult subject when compared to other subjects (Navaz and Begum, 2017).

4.4.2 Opinions in Teachers' Perspective

The opinions were collected among the teachers of English who teach English Lit in the Kinniya Education Zone. As far as the opinions in teachers' perspective are concerned, students' lower English language proficiency, fear of losing best results performance at the GCE (O/L) exam, negative attitude that English Lit is a difficult subject and lack of interest were the factors influencing students' lower preference in selecting English Lit. Students' lack of interest, fear, lower English language proficiency and negative attitude highly influence their preference in both students' and teachers' perspective. A large number of students and teachers had stated that fear of losing results and lower English language proficiency were major factors for students' lower preference.

4.4.3 Opinions in ADE's and ISA's Perspective

The opinions regarding the factors which contribute to the students' lower preference in selecting English Lit were gathered from the respective ADE – English and ISA – English of the Kinniya Education Zone. According to their opinions, the findings show that both the ADE and ISA had said that due to lack of competent teachers to teach Literature was the primary factors for students' lower preference. They assert that when concerning the academic qualifications of the ESL teachers in the Kinniya Education Zone, no teachers had any relevant qualifications such as Bachelor of Arts (BA) in English literature or they were not trained to teach English literature. Moreover, another factor was given that due to lack of motivation and students' lower English language proficiency, most of the students fail to opt English Lit in grade 10 because while a large number of students struggle to perform well in English language, they will be unable to take English Lit and study.

5. CONCLUSION

English Lit. is a useful subject which consists of several advantages for students. It gives a great impact for the students who obtained pass in English Lit in the GCE (O/L) examination, and choose English as a main subject in their GCE (A/L) studies. Similarly, when students apply for National Diploma in English (NDE) at national colleges of education, GCE (O/L) results in English Lit is considered for their enrolment. Moreover, students who study English Lit in grade 10 & 11 grasp English language proficiency produce better results in English at GCE (O/L) exam and it helps them in their higher studies. However, a few numbers of students only prefer to select English Lit in grade 10 in the selected schools of the Kinniya Education Zone. They fail to realize the value in studying English Lit.

As concerning the findings of the current study, this study can be concluded that only a few numbers of students prefer to select English Lit in grade 10 in the selected schools every year. Although less than 5 students select English Lit every year, they produce very lower results in the GCE (O/L) examination. Based on the aim of this study, opinions regarding the factors which contribute to the students' lower preference in selecting English Lit were collected among the students, teachers, ADE and ISA in the Kinniya Education Zone. The findings show that students' lack of sufficient English language proficiency, lack of motivation, lack of interest, fear of losing results in the exam, negative attitude that English Lit is a difficult subject and lack of competent teachers were the major factors influencing students' lower preference in selecting English Lit in grade 10.

Based on the problem of the study, this problem can be overcome when the followings are implemented in the selected schools and other schools in the Kinniya Education Zone as well as in Sri Lanka. They are as follow: Students do not have any background knowledge about English Lit. Therefore, students show lack of interest in selecting English Lit. To give a basic knowledge about Literature, basic things in Literature should be introduced in the English textbook from grade 6; Students should be positively motivated by explaining the value of selecting English Lit in grade 10. In particular, bilingual students should be encouraged to take English Lit since they are good at English; Competent and qualified teachers should be appointed to teach English Lit at schools, and they should be highly trained for teaching Literature effectively.

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